

Political geographers of the past*

Isaiah Bowman: Political geography and geopolitics¹

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When Brian Berry served notice in 1969 that political geography had become a 'moribund backwater', he expressed succinctly what many sensed but none would say in public. There is no single explanation for the demise of political geography, but central to the whole experience was the simple fact that political geography ceased to be political.

The old political geography was a product of specific political and social conditions; its primary concern with national boundaries was not an abstract interest, but the direct outgrowth of empire building and imperial conquest. In the latter part of the 19th century, the acquisition of colonial territories and the setting of expansive colonial boundaries was one of the primary goals of competing national powers in Europe and elsewhere. In the 20th century, the focus turned toward imperial expansion of the advanced nation-states themselves, and this led, albeit under different circumstances, to two world wars, and a number of smaller skirmishes.

With questions of national boundaries at the forefront of international politics, it is hardly surprising that political geography prospered. It offered itself as the study of national boundaries; political geographers examined the ingredients of stable boundaries and the many social, cultural, economic and political forces that could result in instability, and in this way produced a body of knowledge with a direct political affiliation. It is impossible to date precisely the beginnings of demise for political geography, but the process was certainly well under way in the years following World War II. It is not that economic expansion ceased in this period, quite the contrary. Rather, with the onset of decolonization and the rapid internationalization of capital, the expansion of national economies was no longer accomplished through directly political—that is, territorial—means. Insofar as it did not change, the old political geography was left addressing the questions of a bygone age.

The old political geography had been political in the full sense. The politics of territorial expansion were the politics of nationalism and, in the case of colonial expansion, racism. Thus, again, it should not be surprising, if political geography owed its prominence to the importance of territorial expansion, that the most prominent political geographers should be such ardent nationalists as Sir Halford Mackinder and Karl Haushofer. Political

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geographers did attempt to change and develop their subdiscipline, of course, and in the post-war period the major influence was the 'scientific method'. Thus the effort to change was directed at method rather than substance. In the 1950s, the major political questions preoccupying the advanced capitalist nations included the cold war, economic reconstruction, class struggles resulting in the widespread destruction of communist and working-class movements, and the decolonization *cum* economic development of what were then called the dependent territories. An unreconstituted political geography had little if anything to say about these issues. The stance of political geographers was increasingly generalized on issues of little immediate political importance. 'Moribund backwater' is a precise description.

Isaiah Bowman does not fit exclusively into the old political geography for he saw himself as a scientist not an ideologue, a purveyor of facts not a partisan. And certainly Bowman was not mired in any moribund backwater. Along with Mackinder and Haushofer, and perhaps more recently General Pinochet of Chile, Isaiah Bowman ranks as one of the most influential geographers of the 20th century. A full descriptive list of his achievements, honours and positions would be article length and an annotated list book length (Martin, 1980). Briefly, Bowman rose to prominence during World War I in connection with the American preparation for post-war reconstruction and the redrawing of national boundaries in Europe. Director of the American Geographical Society (AGS) and ever enterprising, he became the *de facto* Director of the 'Inquiry', whose job it was to assemble the voluminous geographical and cartographical data and resources that President Woodrow Wilson would use in the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 (see Shotwell, 1937; Gelfand, 1963). Wilson named Bowman Chief Territorial Specialist to the US delegation in Paris, and the base maps made under his direction were used by a number of the territorial commissions at the conference.

Thus was launched Bowman's public career as a political geographer. On his return from Paris, he published *The New World* (Bowman, 1921) which sold nearly 20 000 copies in English and was translated into French and Chinese. The US State Department was sufficiently pleased with the product that it ordered 400 copies, and sent several to each of its embassies and consulates abroad. Throughout the 1920s, Bowman remained Director of the AGS, and organized a series of research projects on the North American frontier and contemporary pioneer settlements. In 1930, his election to the National Academy of Sciences initiated a period of prominent leadership in science policy; throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s, he was successively Chairman of the National Research Council, Director of the Science Advisory Board, Vice-President of the National Academy of Sciences, and President of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Until 1935, when he was named President of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, he remained heavily involved in national and international geographical affairs. With his move to Johns Hopkins, Bowman became a nationally recognized figure, his activities now regularly rather than periodically reported in the national press. But it was not until 1938 with the new threat of war that the next and most prominent phase of Bowman's public career began.

Franklin Roosevelt was elected to the US presidency in 1932, and at that point resigned as a member of the Council of the AGS, where he had been an acquaintance of Bowman. In his work in the National Research Council between 1933 and 1935, Bowman had had cause to confer with Roosevelt, but the request which came from F.D.R. in 1938 was related not to Bowman's management of science policy, but to his studies of pioneering and settlement. Hitler's invasion of successive border nations and his growing campaign inside Germany against Jews, communists and intellectuals had already created a problem with

refugees, and Roosevelt became convinced that, in the event of war, the 'refugee problem' would become massive. Although his own State Department officials privately disavowed the figure, F.D.R. estimated that between 10 and 20 million people would be homeless after the war. Bowman had sent F.D.R. a copy of his *Limits of Land Settlement* (Bowman, 1937), prepared under the auspices of the Council on Foreign Relations, an elite group of businessmen, statesmen and educational leaders (Bowman had been a founding member of the CFR in 1921) who became a think tank for the State Department. In late 1938, F.D.R. asked Bowman to begin surveying the global possibilities for the resettlement of refugees.

With the onset of war, Bowman earned more general responsibilities, ultimately becoming a 'Special Advisor to the Secretary of State and to the President'. His major responsibility was to coordinate information and foreign policy options concerning the territorial aspects of post-war reconstruction. Thus he was, according to Dean Acheson, 'one of the architects of the United Nations' (Acheson, 1950). It is difficult to convey with descriptive detail the precise nature of Bowman's influence in this period. Suffice it to say that he was not one of the five most influential persons of the period; he never played an *overt* policy-setting role in the US Government. Yet he was sufficiently influential in fashioning wartime and post-war foreign policy that Cordell Hull, Secretary of State for Roosevelt until 1944, could say (and periodically reiterate) that 'there was no one upon whom President Roosevelt and I leaned more heavily' (Hull, to David W. Robinson, 12 January 1946; JHU).²

The purpose of this recitation of roles is not simply to reprint the curriculum vitae of Isaiah Bowman, but to highlight some of the important activities in a career that has been essentially lost to the collective memory of the discipline. For the demise of political geography also meant the erasure (by neglect) of the *history* of political geography and its practitioners. Today, for example, Bowman is probably best known for his *Geography in Relation to the Social Sciences* (Bowman, 1934) which, while much advertised by Bowman himself and still referred to today, is one of the most opaque and least consequential of his works. But there is a larger reason for the above recitation. Essentially, Bowman's political geography was one of action as much as theory. It is not possible to know what he thought without knowing what he did, for that which was often left vague and ambiguous in his words was quite unequivocal in his deeds.

As much as his geography was political, Bowman insisted that it was equally scientific in aspiration. The juggling of this contradiction between scientific objectivity and political purpose underlay the whole of his work. The fascination of Bowman, indeed, is not just that he juggled with this and other polar contradictions—he saw himself, for example, as an idealist and a realist, and he was a nationalist as much as an internationalist—but that he was in different degrees aware of these contradictions; his writings record his struggles to resolve them, but his deeds represent the clearest resolution. These intertwined contradictions, and Bowman's attempt continually to compromise between the opposite extremes they implied, make for the complexity of his political geography. I cannot hope to portray this complexity in a short article, but by looking at Bowman's treatment of geopolitics and political geography, where the contradiction between science and politics came to a head, I hope to offer one window into a fascinating and influential geography career. Given the present international political situation, not to mention the situation of geography as a discipline, it is a career of more than passing contemporary interest.

When Bowman penned 'Geography versus geopolitics' less than a year after the US entered World War II, he not only treated pressing contemporary issues but dealt with ideas that had concerned him for nearly 20 years. The essential message of the article is that geopolitics is a political ideology, political geography is scientific. Thus he wrote:

There is no sure 'science' to bring us out of these new deeps of international difficulty. Geopolitics is simple and sure, but, as disclosed in German writings and policy, it is also illusion, mummery, an apology for theft. Scientific geography deepens the understanding (Bowman, 1942a: 658).

This did not represent any great new idea for Bowman; the piece was thoroughly polemical. He had always insisted, if usually in less heated terms, that science was one thing, politics another. To be sure, science could be pursued in the name of political goals, but this of itself did not affect the substance or integrity of science; indeed it was the democratic ideal, Bowman said, which gave science its beneficent social direction, and science in turn fuelled the 'democratic ideal' (Bowman, 1939a).

Bowman not only believed this, he practised it. Perhaps his major intellectual contribution was *The New World*, published first in 1921, and this volume was aimed explicitly at the nation's leaders in the field of foreign policy. *The New World* was a political geographic survey of conditions following World War I and the Paris Peace Conference. Successfully, as we have seen, the book was written in hopes that it would provide American leaders with some of the information necessary for constructing post-war foreign policy. His later geographic work was performed with the same goal in mind, and this is especially true of his work on the frontier and land settlement. But with his move from the AGS to the presidency of Hopkins in 1935, Bowman's direct participation in geographic research was largely supplanted by administrative concerns and government advising. In his role primarily as geographer and scientist, it had not been difficult for Bowman to maintain the separation between scientific results and methods on the one side and the political uses of science on the other. But as his career in geography gave way to one in politics, the separation became more difficult to maintain. This is clear not just in the text of 'Geography versus geopolitics', but in the context which led to it being written.

The onset of World War II, and American participation after Pearl Harbor, led to a discussion within the Allied schools of geography (but particularly in the US) concerning the concept and theories of geopolitics. In 1924, Karl Haushofer had founded his *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*, and in the next 12 years the group around this journal published many volumes on geopolitics, including a trilogy entitled 'Macht und Erde' (Power and Earth) which was intended as the German answer to Bowman's *New World*. The latter, the German geographers felt, was the political geographic manifesto of and for the victors of World War I. As is well known, Haushofer, while never apparently an actual member of the Nazi party, exercised considerable influence over its policies in the period leading up to the war. He visited Hitler regularly while the latter was in jail and, according to Bowman, *Mein Kampf* bears the clear imprint of Haushofer's thought. With its central concept of *Lebensraum*, applied particularly to the necessary national space of the German people, Haushofer's geopolitics provided not only strategic advice for Hess and Hitler, before Hess's flight to Scotland, but also provided the overall political rationale for German geographic expansion in Europe which precipitated World War II.

In a remarkable letter written to Lionel Curtis of Oxford, two months after the British declaration of war, Bowman admitted candidly that *The New World* was 'no doubt colored by my position in the Western world and in a country which was one of the Allied and Associated Powers of the World War' (Bowman to Curtis, 2 November 1939; RGB). It was little more than two years later, however, that Bowman would defend in absolute terms political geography as science, while at the same time condemning geopolitics as mere ideology. This hardening of the categories, to use one of Bowman's own phrases, was occasioned less by German statements on behalf of geopolitics than by American ones.

In the first place, there was a certain Professor Renner of Columbia University who

published in *Time* a set of maps depicting the geopolitical world from a pro-Nazi perspective. He had invoked the name of Bowman and others as eminent American geopoliticians. At first Bowman had refused to take Renner and his maps seriously. They 'seemed so absurd', he wrote to the journalist Walter Lippmann, 'that I thought the reaction would be generally unfavorable' (Bowman to Lippmann, 9 September 1942; RGB). More threatening to Bowman was the fact that anti-Nazi thinkers whom he counted within his own ranks also insisted upon calling him a 'geopolitician'. By some it was declared that American geopolitics was in fact the precursor of German geopolitics and that Bowman was 'our' geopolitician, to be placed against Haushofer. Others simply advocated the development of a superior American geopolitics; here, for example, is H. W. Weigert (1941: 26) with whom Bowman had a short correspondence:

The lack of centers where the American student and soldier can, like the German youth in Munich, be trained to understand the facts and to think in terms of political geography and geopolitics seems to me a regrettable flaw in the endeavor to organize democracies against the totalitarian onslaught. In view of the vast scientific resources possessed by this country it would be inexcusable if the American General Staff cannot be supplied with as many enthusiastic experts on geopolitics as Haushofer was able to offer to the German General Staff.

And there were still others, such as the respected political scientist Nicholas Spykman (Bowman, 1942b; Spykman, 1942), who simply did not make any distinction between geopolitics and political geography.

These responses made Bowman very defensive. While he was anxious to be America's *answer* to Haushofer, he wanted to avoid altogether being cast as the *American* Haushofer. The article on 'Geography versus geopolitics' was therefore written 'in self-protection', as he wrote to Walter Lippmann, while angling to have Lippmann excerpt a statement from the article for publication in the *Herald Tribune* (Bowman to Lippmann, 9 September 1942; RGB). The latter did not materialize—the blood was none too good between Lippmann and Bowman—but Bowman himself ensured that the piece had wide circulation. As was now his custom, he distributed several hundred copies of the article, not only to geographers and other academics, including Weigert and Spykman, but also to business and political leaders. He sent copies to a number of leading members of the State Department with whom he now worked as an advisor, and to Vice-President Henry Wallace. In his letter to Sumner Welles, Under-Secretary of State (29 September 1942; RGB), Bowman explained the purpose of the article: 'Someone, some day, may ask you if you know a fellow named Bowman, and whether it is true, as some persons allege, that he is the American precursor of Haushofer'. Against this and other allegations the article was written.

Beneath the merely political accusation that geopolitics was an ideology which excused 'a wicked national policy of grab and kill' (Bowman to Marcella Ver Hoef, 5 May 1947; RGB), Bowman attempted to discard geopolitics on scientific grounds as well. Thus he saw in geopolitics the search 'for "system"', for "laws" akin to those governing the physical world'. His own approach, which he defended as scientific, was much more *ad hoc*. In his own words, he attempted in *The New World*:

... to deal realistically with the political problems of the postwar world. Its philosophy was one of gradualness of change by rational means. It interposed no ideological preconceived 'system' between a problem and its solution in a practical world in which historical accident, not design only, had played so large a part. It sought to analyze real situations rather than justify any one of several

conflicting nationalistic policies. Its morality was a responsive and responsible world association based on justice . . . (Bowman, 1942a; 652–653).

But this formulation in his own defense raises more questions than it answers. In the first place, it is not clear how a search for systems, logic and law in the social world is necessarily less scientific than an *ad hoc* problem-oriented approach. Second, *The New World* was inspired by the inherently nationalistic policies and perspective of post-war America. It asked the question, essentially, 'what are the features, problems and opportunities in the world that will confront American foreign policy in this period?' One could support this description of Bowman's book with detailed references, country by country, but the most telling evidence lies not in what he said but in what he omitted. The first edition of *The New World* was an exhaustive world survey with but one exception: there was no chapter on the United States. In substance as well as intent, the book represented the view from America outward. And this is additional evidence for the third point.

It is indisputable that geopolitics rested then as now upon some 'ideological preconceived system' of thought, and a particularly abhorrent one at that, but it is not clear at all that Bowman's own perspective did not also involve an 'ideological preconceived system', if a very different one, to be sure. In fact, if one takes seriously Bowman's claims to a philosophy of gradualness, a commitment to rationality, and a case by case approach to political geographic problems, as well as his moral prescription for a 'world association based on justice', then one has some of the very rudiments of what historians generally refer to as Wilsonian democratic idealism. And indeed this is how Bowman is invariably described by historians—as a 'Wilsonian democrat'. There are many features to this particular 'ideological system', but in the context of international relations at the close of World War I, it involved, according to Arthur Link, co-editor of Woodrow Wilson's papers, the 'attempt to apply the principles of the Monroe Doctrine to the World at large' (Link, 1974: 142). The League of Nations was the 'world association' through which this was to be achieved. With Wilson at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, Bowman fought for this 'liberal peace ideal' as already expressed in American democracy. Bowman's omission of a chapter on the US was thereby tantamount to saying that America was the bastion of liberalism and that the causes of international problems were to be found elsewhere. Whether this was a rational or realistic view of the world might be debated but is beside the point. Simply put, however detached a political geographic survey it was, *The New World* was designed to facilitate the spread of the righteous, American, liberal idealism (and as Latin-Americans would add, imperialism) of the Monroe Doctrine.

Bowman's political geography was continually dogged by this contradiction—that it was indeed political while it claimed to be scientific—but the contradiction becomes increasingly acute. In 1921 it revolved around the content and emphasis of his intellectual writings, but as he returned to more active government service in the lead up to World War II, his practical activity expressed the contradiction more clearly. In 1938 Bowman attended the Amsterdam Congress of the International Geographical Union, of which he had been president seven years earlier. European pre-war tensions were apparent and Bowman was obviously dismayed that delegations from the fascist governments of Germany, Italy and Spain took overtly political positions, thus introducing 'governmental policies into what should have been a purely scientific congress'. However, this dismay was registered in a report which Bowman, as chairperson of the US delegation, submitted to the State Department, and which Cordell Hull, Roosevelt's Secretary of State, described as forming a 'valuable contribution to the records of the Department of State' (Bowman, 1939b; Hull to Bowman, 31 March 1939; JHU). Apparently, the Germans, Spanish and Italians were not the only ones mixing science and politics.

The onset of war in 1939 must have been painful for Bowman. He always retained vestiges of his earlier idealism, but it was increasingly supplanted by a bitter conservative pragmatism. By the time of Pearl Harbor, two years later, Bowman was not only an unrepentant apologist for the American war effort, but he was prepared to say so in the pages of the *Geographical Review*, over which he had once presided as Director of the AGS. Writing only a few months before he wrote 'Geography versus geopolitics', Bowman reviewed Spykman's book on *America's Strategy in World Politics*. In a short review article (1942b: 352), entitled 'Political geography of power', he wrote:

We say that we are fighting to defend a way of life, but each draws his own picture of the way he prefers. We never put the sword in the picture. Germany and Japan do. And if it is their way and they are powerful, then it must be included in our way of life. Defense is a part of our way no matter through what seas of blood it leads—or we shall lose the way of life we cherish. The soldier on a Greek vase of the fifth century B.C. carries a sword without apology: to the Greeks war was one of the arts.

Again, the point is not whether he was right or wrong, but rather the mixing, in fine geopolitical style, of 'science' and politics. One can just imagine the reaction of our indignant Bowman were a German geopolitician to justify the war by claiming that 'defense is part of our way no matter through what seas of blood it leads', and then to invoke the authority of 'Greek military art'. The retort that it was a just war would simply make the point conclusive: political positions have suffused scientific conclusions.

By no stretch of the imagination could Bowman be considered a Wilsonian democrat by World War II. Not just his categories but his entire 'ideological system' had hardened far too far for that. In the post-war years, he became a fervent anti-communist, and made many nationally and internationally publicized speeches which made a pure mockery of the distinction between science and politics, geography and geopolitics. But this is a different, equally complex chapter in Bowman's life and cannot be considered here. A political personality, by the late 1940s virtually a statesman, Bowman was permitted to speak in platitudes. But he could never escape the contradictions of his previous work.

In May of 1947, less than three years before he died, Bowman received a letter from a scholar at Northwestern University. Having read his 'Geography versus geopolitics' and his review of Spykman's book, Marcella Ver Hoef inquired of Bowman quite what the difference was between his political geography and the German geopolitics of the last war. 'I wonder', she wrote, 'if the conclusion that you disapprove of geopolitics as used by the Germans but not as it could be used by the Americans is valid'. She went on to conclude that Bowman 'would condone the use of force—war—by the United States to preserve our democratic way of life, yet this is one of your criticisms of the German use of geopolitics. Perhaps the end to which geopolitics is to be used has some bearing on its validity' (M. Ver Hoef to Bowman, 1 May 1947; RGB). Bowman's response is thin. 'Geopolitics', he repeated, 'as a so-called science is bunk.' He continued that the condoning of force in both world wars was 'the kind of condoning that George Washington indulged in'. And he concluded by declaring that 'naturally the end is the all-important thing in the use of force. To the Nazis force was used to kill off the people of other countries and grab their resources. The United States has used force to prevent the Nazis from overwhelming the world' (Bowman to M. Ver Hoef, 5 May 1947; RGB).

The story, and indeed the historical lesson, of Isaiah Bowman is much more complex than I have been able to present in this short retrospective. Bowman understood that geopolitics only masqueraded as science, but a man interested in politics as much as

geography, Bowman indulged in his fair share of masquerading. That he was on the side that beat down fascism hardly indicates the abrogation of his own principles. Today the question is much clearer than in Bowman's day, precisely because we have his and others' experience behind us. Political geography having been condemned as moribund, there is in the present world economic crisis a new geopolitics emerging from Washington, DC and West Point. The former, from Washington, can afford to be political, indeed must be, but the latter, from the academy, must have pretensions, at least, to scientificity. It is as if both elements of the Bowman-Haushofer controversy had become internalized in an American world power.

The most surprising thing about Bowman is that so influential a geographer should have been summarily forgotten by a discipline so much in need of real heroes. The dictum about learning the lessons of history or being condemned to repeat them is especially appropriate here. If there is any lesson to be learned from Bowman's career, a lesson that he himself put into practice, it is that geopolitical questions are inherently political and must be fought out as political questions, not as scientific questions. This might seem like utter sacrilege to geographers, but it is a thoroughly commonplace conclusion to historians for whom much of the vitality of their discipline revolves around political differences. If there is a future in political geography, it is a political future.

Notes

1. This research into the career of Isaiah Bowman has been supported by a grant from the Mellon Foundation to the Department of Geography, Johns Hopkins University, and by a grant from the Spencer Foundation Awards, The Teachers College, Columbia University.
2. Correspondence cited in the text comes from one of two collections of Bowman material. JHU refers to the collection held at The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. RGB refers to the collection held by Robert Bowman in Lincoln, Nebraska.

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